

School & College

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OPINION

Lessons for the States on the 'Expectations' Gap

By STANLEY G. JONES

The hallmark of higher education since the passage of the GI Bill has been access and opportunity. The nation has much to be proud of as, every fall, hundreds of thousands of young people land on our college doorsteps full of anticipation and excitement. Sadly, many will wash out by winter break, and many more will never graduate. Our four-year college graduation rate is 34 percent nationwide, and the six-year rate is just 56 percent — deplorable marks that could be improved if K-12-education officials and higher-education institutions came together and got serious about raising student expectations.

A new U.S. Department of Education study, "The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School Through College" — based on a longitudinal study of a representative group of students from the 1992 high-school class — shows that a rigorous high-school curriculum is the best ticket to success in college.

What we have traditionally thought of as the "college prep" curriculum has broader relevance in preparing students not just for higher education, but also for work, active citizenship, and participation in today's economy. The days when young people could complete their education in high school and find work that would pay a living wage are gone.

Unfortunately, only a handful of states require high-school students to pursue advanced courses in core subjects like math and English in order to graduate. According to "Closing the Expectations Gap," a new survey of all 50 states released late last month, more states are moving to enact graduation requirements that include four years of rigorous English and mathematics through at least Algebra II. However, so far only eight, including my state of Indiana, have set up such requirements. Twelve more say they plan to do so in the future. Similarly, the report, conducted by Achieve Inc., an organization set up by the nation's governors and business leaders, indicates that more than two-thirds of the states report that they are working to align their high-school standards with college and workplace expectations. But only five states say they have completed that process.

Meanwhile, the Achieve survey shows that very few states have assessments in place that truly indicate whether students are ready for college or the workplace. High-school exit examinations, now (or soon to be) in place in half the states, still mostly assess eighth-, ninth-, and 10th-grade academic standards.

The bottom line: In nearly every state, students can do what is asked of them to earn a high-school diploma and still be unprepared for success in college or at work.

The problem is not with high schools alone. College faculty members and administrators regularly complain about the lack of student preparation, but their institutions continue to accept unprepared

students and to enroll them in developmental or remedial courses — basically high-school algebra and English classes. When students fail, who is held accountable? Not the high schools that pass them through to graduation without essential skills. Not the colleges that admit them and willingly accept their tuition.

That must change.

In Indiana we have made huge strides in strengthening four key areas: expectations, alignment, accountability, and incentives. Twelve years ago, Indiana began its "Core 40" college-preparatory curriculum — a statewide initiative that asked students to follow the curriculum voluntarily. As a result, the percentage of our young people graduating from high school with the new Core 40 diploma skyrocketed from 13 percent to 65 percent in 10 years. Over that same period, the state moved from 34th to 10th in the nation in the percentage of high-school seniors going to college.

In 2004 Indiana's Education Roundtable recommended that we require the college-prep curriculum for all students. In 2005 the state legislature agreed and made the curriculum mandatory for all students entering eighth grade next fall. When those students enter college, Core 40 will become a minimum entrance requirement for Indiana's public four-year colleges.

The focus on raising high-school graduation requirements in most states has emerged primarily to address economic concerns. In Indiana business and education leaders recognized more than a decade ago that the state and its citizens would face severe economic hardship unless more young people were ready for college and the demands of the global workplace. Officials were aware that low-skilled, high-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector would become extinct, and that the middle-class dream of finding good work with good wages was already on the decline. We also recognized that the "new economy" jobs we wanted to bring to Indiana demanded a work force with greater skills and knowledge — advanced math as well as science skills, mastery of writing, and the ability to analyze and communicate effectively. The recognition of such stark economic realities has helped to inoculate our efforts from political turmoil. We've had four governors in the last 12 years, three Democrats and one Republican; each governor has advanced — and deepened — the state's commitment.

Not surprisingly, the states moving the furthest and the fastest to close the expectations gap are those that have effectively overcome the traditional barriers between the K-12 and postsecondary worlds, including many states that are doing so as part of the 22-state American Diploma Project Network that includes Indiana. Based on Indiana's experience, I venture to make the following recommendations about how states can bring state officials, legislatures, schools, and colleges together to make change:

- Align high-school requirements with college expectations. That means being clear about expectations, and then walking the walk: The public schools aren't the only institutions that need to adjust their efforts; colleges must align their admissions policies with their own expectations. That's why Indiana has tied the Core 40 diploma to both high-school graduation and college admissions.
- Use outside experts. The Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the ACT Inc., and the College Board have provided critical assistance to our efforts in Indiana. Achieve has been instrumental in our success. Such independent third parties bring credibility to the dialogue — which strengthens participation and acceptance from a variety of key stakeholders — and also bring knowledge that can help state experts enhance their proficiency and creativity.
- Make the college-prep curriculum the default curriculum for all high-school students. Rather than

requiring students to opt into a challenging curriculum, automatically enroll them. That approach communicates a clear expectation of the courses students need to prepare for life after high school, and removes obstacles students frequently encounter in gaining access to those courses. Without such a core, many low-income students, for example, are advised not to take any academically challenging course because they are not thought of as "college material."

- Give college-readiness tests in high school. Why wait until students arrive in college to give them a placement test? Indeed, states should assess high-school students before their senior year. Not surprisingly, Indiana's end-of-course tests in Algebra II and 11th-grade English have shown widely uneven proficiency levels throughout the state. Those early indicators provide schools the opportunity and time to ensure that students have the necessary skills for success in college.
- Create a deliberate and ongoing communications effort. When we started, we knew we had to explain the necessity for the drastic shift we were making in our academic program. Most of the state's high-school and college counselors — and parents — believed that many students did not have the skills to succeed in Core 40. We argued that students who were not part of that curriculum were inevitably on track to low wages and dead-end jobs. We explained that young people would be more engaged in school and motivated to learn if schools wiped out low-level remedial courses in high school, which reinforce low expectations and contribute to behavioral problems. Over the past 12 years, as the percentage of students receiving Core 40 diplomas has grown to 65 percent, resistance and skepticism have given way to support and enthusiasm.
- Align financial aid with taking a rigorous curriculum. Incentives work. Indiana enhanced its need-based financial-aid policy with additional awards to low-income students who graduate with the Core 40 diploma. Not only are Core 40 students enrolling and succeeding in college at higher rates, but the combination of the diploma and financial-aid programs has allowed us to reach more students who are or will be the first generation in their family to go to college. The federal government has begun a similar program, of Academic Competitiveness Grants, to provide low-income college freshmen and sophomores who have completed a "rigorous" high-school program grants of \$750 and \$1,300 a year.
- Make it more transparent how well high schools are preparing students for college and how well colleges do with the students they admit. Higher education should report back to the schools about how their graduates perform in collegiate courses. Similarly, states should publicly report remediation, persistence, and completion rates for all higher-education institutions. In Indiana we have advanced public reporting of K-12- and higher-education indicators; however, we have not yet created a systematic approach to linking the indicators across systems. New efforts like our initiative in electronic high-school transcripts hold great promise in making such connections.

Drastic changes must be made if the next generation of students is to be successful. With a unified effort, we can improve the transition from school to college — and truly make colleges welcoming.

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